

Second Tompkins County Courthouse
121 East Court Street
Ithaca
Tompkins County
New York

HABS No. NY-5442

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SECOND TOMPKINS COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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Location: 121 East Court Street, Ithaca, Tompkins County, New York.
Present Owner: Tompkins County.
Present Use: Museum, government offices.
Significance: Oldest Gothic Revival courthouse remaining in the State.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1854.
2. Architect: John F. Maurice. Classical detailing in north section of second story courtroom designed by William Henry Miller.

- B. Historical Context: The site was given to Tompkins County in 1817 by Simeon Dewitt for the original courthouse. The Second Tompkins County Courthouse served Tompkins for seventy-eight years until supplanted by the present Courthouse built in 1932.

Prepared by: Eleni Silverman
Architectural Historian HABS
July 1984

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A mid nineteenth-century public building with a well developed plan, notable open-timber roof, and other interesting details derived from medieval prototypes. Its original State can be clearly observed despite some interior subdividing. This building is an uncommon survivor of its period in central New York.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Two stories with a three story tower, rectangular in plan, approximately 57' x 75'.
2. Foundation: Stone, laid in random ashlar, three feet above grade with a beveled water table.

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3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Red brick, divided into bays by buttresses, and into stories by a simple moulded belt course just below the second-story window sills. Small octagonal corner turrets extend above the roof level.

The walls were later covered with gray stucco, which has effaced some of the detail.

4. Structural system, framing: Masonry exterior bearing walls, wooden floors and timber roof trusses.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: An entrance is centered on each end of the building (north and south); they are similar. The masonry opening is spanned by a two-centered pointed arch, moulded above the spring line, with three wooden colonnettes in each jamb and a hood mold. Below a transom bar, there are double doors (modern replacements). Three steps and a stone threshold lead to each doorway. A door to the basement, on the east side of the building, is an addition to the original structure.
- b. Windows and shutters: Window openings have stone sills. On the first story the openings are rectangular, divided into two parts by wooden tracery, each having a trefoil head; some openings have lost their tracery. On the second story the openings are pseudo-arched (or triangular-headed) and also traceried, with a trefoil above each part, and a longze above, in the center.

At the center of each end, on the second story, there is a large two-centered pointed-arched window, divided into three part by wooden tracery. A transom bar divides the lower section, in which the glazing opens, from the upper section.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof.
- b. Cornice: A wooden arcaded trefoil course forms the lower portion of a cornice which also extends along the rake of the gables. It is crowned by a small wooden roll molding and a large wooden cavetto. Along the east and west sides of the building, the cornice is interrupted twice by a triangular corbel.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: At the southeast corner of the corner of the building there is a tower, square in plan, of slight projection; it is marked by angle buttresses at the corners. Only its topmost story projects sufficiently above the roof to expose four faces.

The third story of the tower is a belfry, with a pointed-arched (two-centered) opening on each of the four sides, trimmed by a hood mold. Each opening is divided into two parts by tracery, and filled with louvers.

The roof is flat, and parapetted with a wooden arcaded railing between the corner buttresses.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. First floor: A central longitudinal corridor gives access to rooms at each side. There are stairs in the southwest and northeast corners of the building.
- b. Second floor: The courtroom appears to have originally filled the second story. Partitions now restrict it to the central four bays, plus a gallery in the bay at the south end. There is now, at the north end, an apse roughly semi-elliptical in plan, behind the judge's bench. A semicircular railing in front of the bench divides this functional area from that reserved for spectators. Offices occupy the NW and SE corners.

The second story originally was open to the trussed roof, but the space is now subdivided by an attic floor located at or near the beginning of the roof.

2. Stairways: A stair in the northeast corner of the building leads from the first to the second floor: there are 19 risers, of which the upper five are winders, an open string, square newel, molded handrail, two turned mahogany balusters per tread, and molded nosings.

The southwest stair has a high octagonal newel, and heavy turned balusters between the first floor and the first landing, which is nine risers above the floor. A second landing is four risers higher; four more to another landing, and two to the second floor. The string is open up to the first landing, and closed above it. A winding stair leads up into the gallery and belfry; it has a closed string and pine treads.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceilings are plaster. Traces of painted "stone joints" remain on the wall of the corridor, the ceiling is divided into panels with molded wooden rails and there is a small wooden cornice.

The most notable original feature of the courtroom is the open timber roof, intact but now only partly visible. There are seven arch-braced hammer-beam trusses, carrying seven purlins on each side, which in turn carry matched and beaded boards. Each

has a central pendant. There is a ridge pole. All of this roof woodwork is painted in imitation wood graining. The gallery has a solid wooden railing, ornamented with trefoil-headed arcading. The attic floor is an addition, for which additional trussing was introduced. Its lower side forms the present courtroom ceiling, which is divided into panels of narrow matched and beaded boarding by wooden moldings. The ceiling is dark brown. At each bay a quadrant arch projects from the wall into the room; it is molded and has a quatrefoil circle in the spandrel. This appears to belong to the original roof trussing, but a cove made of narrow matched and beaded boards, between arches, is contemporary with the present ceiling. Each arch has a pendant ornament at its crown. The woodwork of the north end of the room appears to be from a different period. There is a shallow apse on axis, with a semi-elliptical plaster head. It is framed by wooden pilasters of the Roman Doric Order, on high pedestals. Above this is a small second-story order, with a pair of pilasters on each side. A central doorway is crowned by a triangular pediment, with an egg-and-dart course in the architrave, and a denticulated cornice. At each side there is another doorway, similar in detail except that the pediment is segmental. The judge's bench rests on a dais, four steps above the main floor level of the room. In front of it there is a railing, semicircular in plan, with square pedestals and turned balusters.

8. Heating: Originally heated with stones. Later a steam system was installed; old ornamental steam radiators are still in place.

D. Site:

The building is centered near the north edge of a large block, which is bounded on the west by North Cayuga Street, and on the east by North Tioga Street. It is entered either from a public park area at the south, or from East Court Street, which forms the northern boundary of the block. Churches and public buildings predominate in this immediate area. This building is on the site of the first court house.

Prepared by: Harley J. McKee
Architect, NPS
October 13, 1966

Edited by: Eleni Silverman
Architectural Historian, HABS
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